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OPUS DEI: A gift to today's Christians

For twenty centuries the church has inhabited the world, she has always sought to saturate the world with the saving light of Jesus Christ. During these centuries, God's church on her pilgrimage on earth has come a long way. The path has been rough no doubt, but there have also been smooth periods. One fact has remained evident: God has guided the church lovingly all this while.

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At certain times God has chosen to intervene directly infusing renewed vigour into the church to guide her in periods of trials. This brief discourse dwells on one such intervention in the life of the church: The foundation of Opus Dei.

To appreciate better the whole picture, it would be necessary to outline briefly the historical journey of the church so far. This would serve as a prelude to understanding the historical journey could be viewed in the light of three distinct eras. The first, the era of the early Christians; the second, the Christian era and finally the modern times.

The Early Christians:

The era of the Early Christian began shortly after the ascension of Jesus Christ, precise in Pentecost day, and spanned through the first three centuries AD. From the very beginning, they embraced a way of life aiming at exact imitation of Jesus Christ. They practiced prayer, Christian mortification and engaged in works of mercy while some, in addition freely chose to remain virgins, thus forgoing married life for the sake of the Kingdom. For these Christians who lived among the other members of their community, in their own houses, owning property and earning their living by working, their faith held a two responsibility: personal sanctity and apostolate.

With the scattering of Christians across the then known world, at first due to persecutions from the Sanhedrin, the nascent church later struggled to assert herself in the

hostile pagan Roman Empire. Many were martyred. To be a Christian demanded a high calibre with solid convictions. Though they led normal lives as freemen or slaves, their impact on their pagan contemporaries through their personal apostolate proved very efficacious.

Personal apostolate means giving witness with one's own life to the faith that one professes. It means consistency between one's faith and one's actions as an imitator of Christ. Thus, with a silent and almost invisible personal apostolate, they won over their pagan contemporaries who were attracted to this way of life. So attractive was it both supernaturally and humanly that the pagans remarked; "See how they love one another" (*Tertullian, Apologeticus, 391*) *The Christian Era:*

This period began during the course of the fourth century, after the edict of Milan in 313AD, which symbolized the end of Roman persecution. With the Church enjoying external peace, many more converts were received into the Church, many of whom retained habits that were somewhat pagan. Soon, the pagan practices gradually began to find their way back to the Roman-Christian society, especially among many of the lukewarm Christians. Many Christians gradually lost sight of the possibility and importance of christianizing the world from within as the immorality of the society seemed so oppressive that the general perception then was, rather than mingle with pagans and risk being tainted, it was better to abandon the world if one wanted to pursue perfect consecration to God's service. Sanctity seems to have been pursued only by those who retired to

the monasteries, and later to the various forms of religious life.

The Modern Christians:

.The last 500 years of Renaissance, Humanism, Reformation, Enlightenment and Socialism are once more threatening to uproot Christianity from the earth. More recent waves of Modernism, Materialism, and the New Age Phenomenon... have only worsened matters. As a result of this, many Christians today have lost the zeal to conquer the world for Christ, which their first century predecessors had. Today, we have enervated lay Christians who view a world run according to the precepts of the Gospel to be an impossible dream, leaving them with no choice than to find shelter under the amorphous recommendation that every one should be good according to individual taste. The general belief is

that lay people could not possibly hope to lead holy lives in the middle of the world, and much less to carry out an effective personal apostolate amongst their peers. But God has not abandoned mankind. He is stirring once more the zeal of Christians in the world. As an example of God's providence, on October 2, 1928, a 26 year-old Spanish priest, father Josemaria Escriva, by divine inspiration founded Opus Dei, an institution whose mission is to remind ordinary people of their Divine call to seek sanctity in the ordinary things of their everyday lives. To remind everyone, no matter one's profession, be he a taxi driver, Okadaman, market woman, lecturer, diplomat... that one could actually sanctify all earthly realities, using them as a means to attain personal sanctity. To revive the zeal of the early Christians whose apostolic zeal, carried out in the ordinary daily activities, their work, their

friendships... transformed pagan Rome into the seat of Christianity. And like Opus Dei, other institutions and initiatives arising, which shows that Christians should not remain passive and lukewarm. Speaking about the vocation to Opus Dei, in an interview with an American journalist, Blessed Josemaria compared the vocation to Opus Dei to that of the first Christians. "If you want a point of comparison, the easiest way to understand Opus Dei is to consider the life of the early Christians. They lived their Christian vocation seriously, seeking earnestly the holiness to which they had been called by their baptism. Externally, they did nothing to distinguish themselves from their fellow citizens." (Conversations with Msgr. Escriva, Scepter, Princeton, 1993, No. 24)

Blessed Josemaria Escriva saw then that his task was to teach people how

to find God in their work. The ideal that filled him was something virtually unheard of in the early part of the twentieth century but which for the Christians of the first century was a matter of course. The Second Vatican Council proclaimed officially this teaching in its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church: "The laity, by their very vocation, seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God. They live in the world, that is, in each and in all of the secular professions and occupations. They live in the ordinary circumstances of family and social life, from which the web of their existence is woven. They are called there by God so that by exercising their proper function and being led by the Spirit of the Gospel, they can work for the sanctification of the world from within, in the manner of leaven" (no. 31). (*Lumen Gentium*)"All the faithful of Christ, of

whatever rank or status, are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity"(No. 40).
(*Lumen Gentium*)

To appreciate the big picture of what will be the outcome of this new Christian renewal effected by the personal apostolate of the Christians of the first century. "We are of yesterday and already we fill the world and all your places: the cities, the islands, the towns, the municipalities, the councils, the very army camps, the tribunals, the assemblies, the palace, the senate the forum. We have left you only your temples Tertullian, *Apologeticus* 37). It is beyond doubt that the expansion of Christianity by the end of the second and the beginning of the third centuries was indeed explosive. Can we therefore question the efficacy of the approach of personal apostolate towards re-Christianizing the modern world, a mission of which

Christians have received the Divine mandate? Little wonder why in the beginnings of Opus Dei, this young founder had told the zealous young men who had given their lives to God in Opus Dei, that their lives to God in Opus Dei, that their wildest imaginations could not fathom the marvels that would come about as a result of their self-giving. "Dream", he told them, "and your dreams will fall short..."

With the perspective that history has provided us, we can better appreciate God's Providence and indeed be thankful for this new impulse to spur the Church on her pilgrimage towards the New Jerusalem, and thus lead to a more bountiful flowering of Christianity in this new millennium.

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